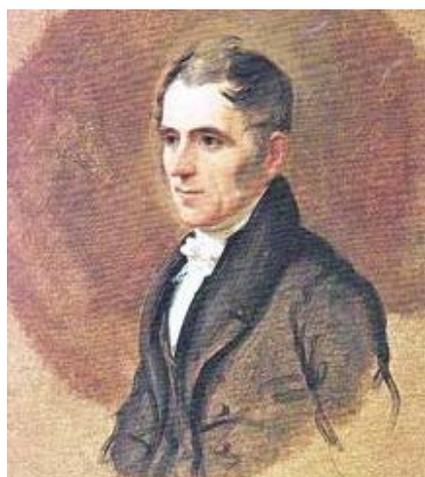


# Focus On: ‘Honest’ John Fielden

The lofty spire of Unitarian Church that commands the Calder Valley at Todmorden is now in HCT ownership. It was built as the memorial to the local MP, cotton magnate and philanthropist, who achieved a national reputation: ‘Honest’ John Fielden.



*Anonymous unfinished portrait of John Fielden probably painted when he was in his late thirties*

Born into a family with a modest but rapidly expanding cotton spinning business, John Fielden (1784-1849) came to lead the partnership when his father Joshua died. Having harnessed the water power of the steep upland cloughs as they tumble down the steep Calder valley, the business had flourished and diversified from spinning into weaving, thence finance and export, enabling it to weather better than many competitors the wild market fluctuations of the cotton trade. Waterside, Robinwood and Lumbutts Mills in the valley bottom at Todmorden all followed as the Fieldens’ acquired and built mills using both steam and water power, embracing power looms and other cutting-edge technology.

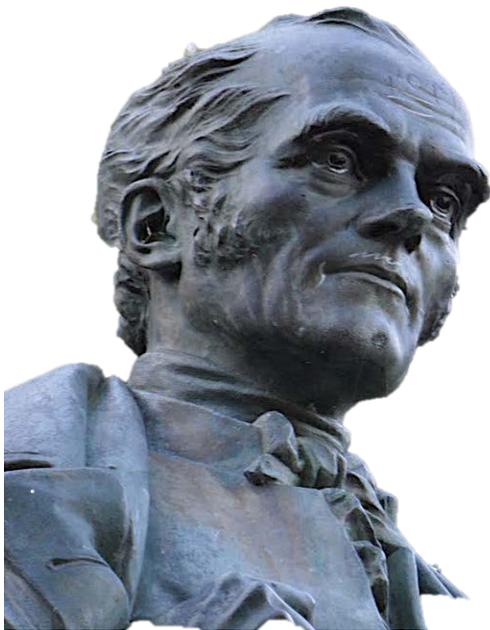
John was a man of strong personal conscience. Brought up by his father as a

Quaker, he was later greatly influenced by Methodism, and then the breakaway Methodist Unitarians; all three of these were religious traditions not shy of political engagement. Fielden encouraged Unitarian preacher Richard Wright to visit Todmorden and helped the Todmorden Unitarian Society establish. He attended their new chapel in Bank Street. When the Society got into financial difficulties John bought its chapel, settled its debts and for the rest of his life was a generous supporter, paying for visiting preachers among other things. Fielden founded several Sunday Schools, teaching himself at some. This was a time when for many children of working people national schooling was unknown and Sunday was their only contact with education. He founded a factory school at the Waterside Mill.

Fielden’s active engagement in local political causes led him to be a co-founder of the Manchester Political Union and later the Todmorden Political Union. These Unions organised mass petitions and meetings for electoral reform and it was finally the powerful popular movement that overcame entrenched opposition to the 1832 Reform Act – not least for fear of revolution if the demands were ignored. Although it took another 96 years to arrive at universal suffrage, the 1832 Act expanded the electorate by about 60% and had a great effect in the North of England where the growing population following the industrial revolution was not reflected in the unreformed Commons. Whilst campaigning for reform John was proposed as a one of two Radical MPs for Oldham (the other being William Cobbett) in a town that

acquired two parliamentary seats for the first time under the 1832 Act reforms. In an electoral address Fielden stated he had ‘nothing but an anxious solicitude to see the people restored their just rights, and especially the position of the labouring portion of society greatly improved.’ It was a powerful statement from a wealthy mill-owner and at odds with the views of many others of his station.

MPs then drew neither salaries nor expenses but John was more active than many MPs in pursuing liberal causes. He also gave financial assistance to several liberal candidates and MPs of more modest means. As a parliamentarian he pressed for further electoral reform and was the chairman of the huge Chartist open-air meeting at Peep Green, Hartshead Moor in 1839, said at the time to have been the largest political meeting ever in England.



*Statue of John Fielden by J. A. Foley RA, erected 20 years after the MP's death in celebration of the 'Ten Hours Act'. Moved twice, it now stands in Centre Vale Park, Todmorden, on land which was once the grounds of the Fielden's family home.*

Fielden's lengthy campaign for factory reform finally bore fruit in the 1847 Factory Act, usually known as the 'Ten Hours Act' under which the permissible hours of work for women and children were restricted to ten hours a day, eight on Saturday, with Sunday as a day of rest. Jointly promoted by Fielden and Lord Ashley, it was Fielden who piloted it carefully through parliament, where the Bill severely split all parties, since Ashley had moved to the House of Lords the year before.

John Fielden was energetic, handsome, compassionate, un-snobbish and generous with his money; when he died obituaries were not merely loyal, but spoke of genuine loss of an industrialist-reformer with national achievements to his name. His grave is in the burial ground off Bank Street, Todmorden, against the former Unitarian chapel, in a characteristically modest plot with a simple kerb. The Bank St. chapel has now been converted to flats, but the burial ground is in HCT ownership and unlocked during daylight hours.

The Fielden's company was sold in the 1960's and its mill buildings have mostly been demolished since the 1980s. Honest John's public monument – the new Todmorden Unitarian Church replacing the Bank St chapel that was no longer large enough to house the congregations - was not as self-effacing as its dedicatee. It was paid for by his sons with a declared budget of £6,000, but eventually cost £35,000 (£3.1m today, though the insurance rebuilding cost is put at £19m) and is a fittingly inspiring and prominent monument for such a well-loved local figure.

*- Roland Jeffery*

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